

Dek Unu Magazine

Fine Photography



May, 2019

Nicholas Luchenbill

"Iraq Revisited"

All images ©Nicholas Luchenbill

Dek Unu Magazine

Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven Images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

Dek Unu publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

Since Matthew Brady's "Dead at Antietam" images, photographers... Capa, Davidson, McCurry... have been documenting and reacting to war, its action, and its aftermath. Nicholas Luchenbill makes his photos after the action, in photomontages that layer memories from his three combat tours in the Middle East. His art practice is his attempt to understand his own wounds from war trauma and to speak to other veterans' mental health issues.

That such aesthetically-pleasing artworks can grow from such ugly sources is a tribute to Luchenbill's artistic vision and accomplished craft. That his work is employed to help others is a tribute to his compassion and his ongoing mission.



Day 25

Day 25 is a collection of images from a day that my unit spent at a makeshift gun range on the outskirts of Baghdad. Toward the end of the day, this group of kids had gathered and it just seemed strange to me for some reason. They were all smiles and jumping around, trying to get our attention, running around like goofballs being silly. I remember we gave them some water and a bit of food, and then they ran off.



Day 45

Day 45 combines images of a training day my unit had at the Baghdad International Airport. This was a day where platoons in my unit practiced some of our basic soldiering skills such as first aid procedures, hand grenade throwing, land navigation and so on.

It was one of those days where you just had to get it done so the officers in the unit could check the box and say we were trained.





Day 56

These are some of the images I took of the flight line at the airport. There was always something going on, helicopters coming and going. Actually, the flight line was a constant target for sniper fire and mortars. There was never really a dull moment.







Day 145

These are mostly images of myself taking pictures of things on my way into work and of inside our shelter carriers where we kept and monitored the radios.

I spent a good amount of time in a big metal box on top of a HUMVEE in temperatures over 100 degrees.

Good times!





Day 211

Now, these are interesting. These are some shots I took when I convoyed down to Kuwait to go home on leave. They stuck 100s of us in this airplane hangar. There are also some interesting shots of the time I spent in Babylon. And there are some of the other historical sites in there as well.



Day 279

I remember this day so well. Now, these images are of a time when I was stationed on the outskirts of Baghdad at, I think it was, a power plant or something. It was a very, very small outpost; there were only a couple hundred soldiers total.

Early in the morning, we just hear this whistling sound over our heads. Then, out of nowhere, somebody yelling "INCOMING!!!!" And everyone is running for cover, dashing off to get their kevlar on, you name it.

On a regular day, we took only one or two mortars, tops. But not on this day. We started getting hit over and over and over. It seemed like it was never going to stop. I think they said something like over 100 mortars and 30 or so rockets.

It was pretty crazy.







Day 345

Now, Day 345 is kind of like Day 279. It took place on the same outpost, but it was a different attack, similar to the first big one we experienced.

At this point, we were all getting kind of numb to all this.





Day 356

These are some images of just daily stuff I would see. Some daily stuff that I would go through. Convoy over there. Drop stuff off. Convoy back. Spend 12 hours in a guard shack.

Seeing stuff on fire became the norm.





Day 400

Look at young me giving everyone the finger.
Yeah, that dorky-looking guy in the glasses.
This one combines more images of my travels
throughout the country.

I spent a lot of time driving and sleeping in a truck.



Day 437

Day 437 is even more images of the flight line at the airport plus our little outpost on the other side of the airport where we provided radio comms for a small infantry unit. There were only 6 of us there at any given time. Three men slept while 3 men manned the radios.







Day 500

This one is special to me because it combines images that mark both my first few days in the country and some of my last few days in the country.

I remember our year was almost over and we had started packing our gear and sending things home. Then, the order came down to halt all activity and, after a year, we were told we had to stay an extra 3 months.

Now, I wasn't mad about the extra time. What really kinda pissed me off is I wished they had told us before I shipped a brand new pair of boots and underwear home.

I was like “F@#K” I could have used those.



Artist Interview - Nicholas Luchenbill

Welcome, Nicholas. Complex, deeply-absorbing photography!

Most of these images were taken during my first deployment to Iraq in 2003-2004. At the time, I just had a simple point and shoot camera, (I can't even tell you what it was), and I took pictures of everything. Looking back, I was kind of a tourist, just snapping a picture every 5 minutes. Over the years, I started cataloging and putting them into folders so I knew what was what. I think I had over 3000 images at one point. So, I had this massive inventory of snapshots that I knew I wanted to work with. But the trick was how to make them interesting so that people would 1) enjoy them and 2) get the point that I was trying to make. It was really important for me to represent what I believe happens to memory over time. Because I looked at this project as a sort of letting go of some of those memories, finally to be free in my mind to be able to come home. I looked at this project as more of a healing journey for me. Art made it possible to talk about some of my experiences to people outside of my circle.



© Nicholas Luchenbill

I am investigating aspects of anxiety and memory, and the effects that war trauma has on certain memories stored in the brain. The images I construct are based upon my perceptions of what happens when traumatic memories are created and stored in the

brain. In my experience, memories are consolidated, stacked and stored on top of one another, which results in lost and fragmented information, often formatted in a skewed sense of time. In this series, I use images from my first deployment to Iraq that are autobiographical, complicating them through strategies of overlapping, interruption and fragmentation to reflect the sense of anxiety that is the by-product of being placed in a war zone.

You went straight into the Army after high school?

Yes, right after high school. The truth is I was never a very good student in high school. And I didn't know what I was going to do after I graduated. I thought about so many different things that I could do, but, really, the only thing was the Army. So I enlisted and chose to be a part of the Signal Corps as a radio operator. I did 10 weeks basic training at Fort Benning and finished advanced training at Fort Gordon. After my training was complete, I was stationed in Germany and deployed out of Germany twice. Back in the US again, I was stationed at Fort Bragg and, shortly after, I was deployed again. After that deployment, I was stationed at Fort Bliss, in El Paso, Texas, where I currently reside. I had a really good career in the military. I loved what I did. And it broke my heart to have to leave it. I would say the way that it influences my photography is the mindset that there is always another way to see things because everyone has different experiences.

You retired from the Army after 10 years with disability?

That was a long, long road. After my 3rd deployment, things really started to change mentally for me. And when I arrived at Fort Bliss, I tried as hard as I could to hold on, but I was toeing the line with suicidal thoughts. Luckily, my chain of command figured it out in time and got me some help. But after I got the help, they (the Army) gave me a medical discharge.



You teach photography to soldiers. Art therapy?

I do teach photography to soldiers through a program called "Soldier Art Workshops," but it is not therapy. It's just a standard art class. I do stress to them the power art can have, and how it helped me. And how it can help you find your voice if you're having trouble expressing something. For the classes that I've taught, I start with a curriculum, but I adjust once I see the skill level and the needs of those who attend. But I have to stress it's not therapy for legal reasons.

How did you get started? Remember what got you hooked?

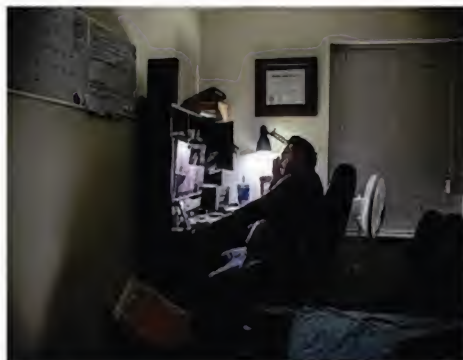
Yes, I was working in a tattoo shop at the time, after I got out of the Army, and my boss kept hounding me about how I should go to school and what I should take to further myself in the tattoo industry. So I enrolled in our community college in El Paso, and I took a class called "Digital Imaging". That was when I was first exposed to photography as more of an art form and more of a way that people can express themselves.

Then you jumped from community college to the BFA program at New Mexico State University.

I was conflicted when I first started the application process for the BFA program at NMSU. Because when you get accepted it adds time to your degree because you have to take more studio classes. And, at the time, I was still unsure what my end goal was going to be. The BFA is presented as a more prestigious degree plan than a typical art "major". The students in the program focus more on studio work, and, at the end of the program, you and your classmates are required to have a thesis show. The thing that I liked the most about the program was, for the most part, I was set free to create. I could come up with an idea, present it to my professor, and get told, "Go make it happen."

There weren't too many surprises; I had done my homework and asked a lot of questions before I submitted my application. To anyone else interested in the BFA route, I would say just do your homework and ask questions. Find out if it's right for you or not. Then just jump in and keep making work. Never stop making work.

I really enjoyed my time in academia. I was a little hesitant about it because I was almost a decade older than everyone with very few shared life experiences. So I really felt like a fish out of water. But over time I settled in and really found my voice.



© Nicholas Luchenbill

What's the art environment like where you work? Do you have a "gang" or are you at it pretty much alone?

El Paso has a really great art scene right now, and it's only getting bigger. There is a large number of artists in the city. At the moment I am a member of the El Paso Art Association. I had found the EPAA after some of my work didn't get invited into a juried show. And I really believed in this work so I was determined to show it somewhere. The EPAA has an annual photography show in the summer, along with like 11 other shows they mount throughout each year.

You have a great eye for composition. Is there other fine art in your background? Painting? Printmaking?

Yes, I paint as well. Not as much as I'd like, but I get to it when I can. I've also been experimenting with some sculpture as well. And this summer I would like to start some printmaking.

What about your gear? Cameras, computers, software?



© Nicholas Luchenbill

I mainly shoot with my Nikon D7100, and I use an 18-300 telephoto lens. I process everything on an iMac using Photoshop and Lightroom. Really, really standard equipment.

Always digital? Or is there wet darkroom and analog photography in your background?

Yes, I've mainly always worked in digital. I worked with 35mm and darkroom procedures while I was in school, but outside of that, I haven't gotten there yet. There are plans to start doing some alternative process projects this summer.

Is there a main message that you stress in your teaching? About art? About artists?

What I have always tried to teach people is to experiment. To push your creativity and your equipment to its absolute breaking point. And to never stop pushing.

Anyone who deserves a "thank you" or a special shout out?

I would like to thank my wife, Marcia, for all the love and continuing support she gives. My children Marilyn, David, and Logan for being a constant source of inspiration. And thanks to my sister-in-law.

Jennifer Hodges for all of her continuing support and her help with my academic career. I can't thank everyone enough. It really does mean the world to me.

Shout out to the people that I have direct contact with almost daily. A few of my closest friends Jarred Cynor, Joshua Flores, and Katherine Chudy. All are also very talented artists working in photography, printmaking, painting, and sculpture. They are huge influences on my work. I can always count on them for good advice. I'm really lucky to have them as friends. I would like to thank my last professor Wes Kline. He really pushed me to be better. And I thank him for that. Also, I draw a lot of inspiration from Gregory Crewdson, Ola Kolehmainen, Penelope Umbrico. There are so many!

And your links so we can stay in touch?



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